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Maintaining the Boundaries: Teacher Preparation Program Admission Criteria for Screening Quality Candidates

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This study examines several Texas university-based teacher preparation program screening measures and admission criteria. The researchers examined those measures stipulated in the Texas Administrative Code, as well as criteria that exceeded those required by the state. Identifying these measures and criteria will allow programs to maintain the boundaries of who becomes a teacher, thus providing the quality teachers required to educate productive members of society.

Keywords: teacher preparation program, teacher certification, teacher preparation program admission

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Teacher preparation programs have the responsibility of providing quality teachers for students across the nation. Embedded in this responsibility is the idea that teacher preparation programs not only prepare quality teachers, but also need to act as gatekeepers to prevent candidates that are not capable of being quality teachers access to students and classrooms. Given this charge, meaningful admission criteria for teacher preparation programs are essential.

Defining characteristics of a quality teacher is a complex issue. The federal government through No Child Left Behind (2001) requires each state to define highly qualified teachers and submit a method for producing highly qualified teachers. Texas defines a highly qualified teacher as one who has

obtained full Texas certification, including appropriate special education certification for special education teachers, and has not had certification requirements waived on an emergency, temporary, or provisional basis; holds a minimum of a bachelor's degree; and has demonstrated subject matter competency in each of the academic subjects in which the teacher teaches, in a manner determined by TEA. (Education Commission of States, 2006, "Texas")

However, educators realize there is much more to being highly qualified than just holding a certification and having content knowledge. Casey and Childs (2007) suggest teachers be proficient in content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical skills, and maintain positive attitudes towards teaching. Given this idea, admission criteria to teacher preparation programs should focus on all four areas to the extent appropriate to program entry. Research, however, indicates a strong focus on screening measures to assess content knowledge—including grade point average, number of hours completed, standardized test scores, and types of courses required and completed—and less emphasis on pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical skills, and attitudes towards teaching (Casey & Childs, 2007; Cohen-Schotanus, Muijtjens, Reinders, Agsteribbe, van Rossum, & van der Vleuten, 2006; Helm, 2006; Uno, Blackwell, & Leonardson, 2001).

The Texas Administrative Code outlines the minimum expectations for teacher preparation program admission. The rule specifically addresses GPA; minimum semester credit hours in content area; passing score on content test; demonstration of basic skills in reading, written communication, math, and oral communication; an application; and an interview or some other measure of appropriateness for certification without specifically mentioning screening tools

for attitude toward teaching (The Texas Administrative Code, 1995).

As university-based teacher education programs continue to come under fire for producing less than quality teachers, it becomes increasingly necessary to maintain the boundaries concerning who qualifies to become a teacher. Holding high standards of admission to teacher education programs requires a coherent plan for screening and admitting candidates (Fallon & Ackley, 2003; Salvatori, 2001; Truell & Woolsley, 2008), which, in turn, requires universities to evaluate critically their admission requirements. This study closely examined several Texas university-based teacher preparation program screening measures and admission criteria, illuminating measures and criteria that either address or neglect to address the candidates' content knowledge and attitudes towards teaching. Identifying these measures and criteria will allow programs to maintain the boundaries governing who becomes a teacher, thus providing the quality teachers required to educate productive members of society.

The purpose of this study was limited to identifying the criteria used by selected Texas university-based teacher preparation programs to guide admission to their respective programs. The central research question for the study was: What screening measures and admission criteria do the selected teacher preparation programs use?

METHODOLOGY

Researchers conducted a content analysis of the admission criteria for 19 selected university-based teacher preparation programs across the state, using data collected from university websites. Programs included in the study were medium-sized, regional, public universities in the state of Texas. No alternative certification programs were included in the study. Data were gathered during the spring semester of 2011, and changes may have occurred to a particular program's website that are not reflected in the findings. (See appendix A for a list of university programs included in the study).

Questions posed to guide the study were formulated based on criteria set forth in the Texas Administrative Code for undergraduate university-based educator preparation programs (<http://info.sos.state.tx.us>). Other topics were included that were of interest to the researchers. (See appendix B for a list of questions for which data were sought).

Once the admission criteria were identified for each university, a content comparison analysis was conducted to investigate the range of criteria used by each program to determine student admission to the program. Areas of uncertainty were investigated via follow-up phone calls to the university. An effort was made to ascertain admission criteria for all teacher preparation programs within the university, but in the absence of general information the research focused on EC-6 certification programs.

FINDINGS

Generally speaking, it appears that all programs met the basic criteria set forth by the state of Texas for admission to a teacher preparation program. However, there were interesting variations among the requirements of the various institutions included in the study.

The first area of investigation related to accreditation status. Specifically, is the program National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accredited? Of the 19 schools surveyed, three have NCATE accreditation. Two schools indicated they are currently in the process of seeking NCATE approval.

Information related to the formal application to the program and the processes involved was collected. Must the student complete an application to be admitted to the program? Must the student pay an application fee? If there is an application fee, how much is it? Does the application process involve an interview or other screening instrument? All 19 schools required an application for admission to their teacher preparation program. Application documents required varied from a single application to a portfolio including supporting documentation such as ethics statements, commitment documents and writing samples. Fifteen of the 19 schools did not mention collecting an application fee. One school charged \$10.00; one charged \$20.00; and one a \$50.00 fee. The highest application fee was \$100.00, charged by one program.

Only two programs mentioned interviews as part of the admission process, and no other screening instruments were reported.



Researchers investigated semester credit hour requirements in relation to admission. How many hours must the student have completed to be admitted to the program? How many hours must be completed in the major teaching field to be admitted to the program?

Three programs did not mention a requirement for a specified number of semester credit hours (SCH) to be completed prior to admission to the teacher preparation program. Five programs required SCH completion of between 40 and 54 hours, while one required 54 or an associate's degree. Eight programs had a 60 SCH requirement, and one required 80 hours and senior standing. An additional program reported all freshman and sophomore level courses must be completed before admission. Considering SCH completed within the major teaching field, 11 of the programs did not report specific requirements in this area. The remaining programs required the applicant to have at least 12 hours satisfactorily completed in the major teaching field.

Data was collected concerning grade point average requirements. What is the minimum cumulative GPA requirement for admission to the program? Are specific criteria established for GPA for other coursework?

In terms of cumulative GPA, all programs reported a set requirement in this area. Twelve schools required an overall GPA of at least 2.5, with one citing a 2.5 in the last 30 hours of coursework as an acceptable alternative. Two schools required a 2.0, and two established a threshold of 2.6. One program reported a 2.7 and one a 2.75 as an overall GPA requirement. Several programs also established GPA thresholds for major teaching field coursework. Three reported a 2.5 requirement, two required a 2.6, and one a 2.75 in the teaching field.

Researchers surveyed programs regarding required coursework for admission. Are specific courses required to be completed for admission to the program? If specific courses are required, what are those courses? Are there grade requirements stipulated for the courses?

All of the schools surveyed required completion of specified coursework prior to admission to the teacher preparation program. Ten programs specifically mentioned the necessity of applicants completing English classes. Five schools reported math coursework as a prerequisite to application, and six programs required completion of a speech communication class. Four universities cited a reading skills requirement, with most meeting this criterion via history or political science coursework. Other courses mentioned included child or human development, educational psychology, and an introductory education course. Some programs surveyed required the applicant earn a certain grade in the specific courses required for admission. Three schools required English grades of C or better, while one program additionally required a minimum of C in math and reading.

Data was also gathered regarding the demonstration of oral communication skills. Six schools required the applicant to demonstrate proficiency via a speech communications course. Of these, three required a grade of at least C, and two a grade of B or better.

Professional preparation programs often require applicants to submit letters of recommendation from practitioners in the field, and the current study included this topic. Are letters of recommendation required as part of the application to the program? If letters of recommendation are required, how many are required and do programs stipulate who may write the letters?

Five of the 19 programs indicated a requirement for candidates to submit letters of recommendation. All five required three letters, and one school specifically required one of the three be from a university faculty member.

Preparation programs were surveyed to determine criteria related to basic skills. What requirements exist related to the demonstration of basic skills in reading, written communication, and mathematics or testing for admission to the program? What minimum requirements for scores are stipulated?

All 19 schools reported information related to this element. Eighteen of the programs required Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) or an approved equivalent measure, while one school met the basic skills requirement via the Texas Success Initiative. Seven programs reported a requirement of a passing score on all parts of the THEA or an approved equivalent. One school required a THEA reading score of at least 240; five schools required at least 250; while three required a score of 260 on the reading portion. Two programs required a math score of at least 240, while one had a required score of 250. On the writing portion, two schools cited a score of 230, and three a 240 on written

communication. While THEA was the most commonly reported instrument, approved alternatives included Compass, Asset, Accuplacer, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or American College Testing (ACT). Required scores on the alternative measures were variable.

Data were collected concerning criminal history issues. Is a criminal background check required for admission to the program?

A survey of the programs revealed that most schools do not require a full criminal history background check for admission to the program, although one campus reported a background check as a prerequisite to admission, and one required self-disclosure of a criminal history on the application. Many universities, however, required a disclosure form or some other document indicating the student gives permission for a criminal history background check to be performed by outside entities for field placement purposes.

Researchers surveyed programs for inclusion of disposition/fitness to teach as a criterion for admission. Is a disposition or fitness to teach evaluation of the student required for application to the program?

Two programs made specific mention of demonstration of acceptable teacher behavior in order to be accepted to the teacher preparation program. Website surveys indicated several schools had mechanisms in place for faculty to report issues with disposition, but these were not explicitly linked to admission.

Data was also collected regarding any specific criteria that programs included as part of their application and admission process. Are there other requirements unique to the program?

Some programs reported specific requirements which were not common to other institutions. For example, two schools required candidates to pass the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, two had oral language proficiency requirements, and one reported written essays as a requirement. Meeting all requirements under the Texas Success Initiative was cited by two schools, and one explicitly required no incomplete grades on the transcript. Two universities required candidates to sign statements related to adherence to standards set forth by the specific teacher preparation program.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this content analysis of the admission criteria for the specified teacher preparation programs were derived from the information posted on the university websites during the spring 2011 semester only. The discussion of the findings will be framed within the admission criteria required by the State of Texas. Readers are encouraged to refer to 19 TAC 227.10 ([http://info.sos.state.tx.us/pls/pub/readtac\\$ext.TacPage?sl=T&app=9&p_dir=N&p_rloc=148706&p_tloc=&p_ploc=1&pg=3&p_tac=&ti=19&pt=7&ch=227&rl=1](http://info.sos.state.tx.us/pls/pub/readtac$ext.TacPage?sl=T&app=9&p_dir=N&p_rloc=148706&p_tloc=&p_ploc=1&pg=3&p_tac=&ti=19&pt=7&ch=227&rl=1)) for complete admission criteria required by the state of Texas.

The Texas Administrative Code governing teacher preparation programs requires that some type of application process be followed by candidates seeking admission to teacher preparation programs. The basic admission criteria required by the Texas Administrative Code (TAC) includes an application, competency in oral communication, a minimum of 2.5 GPA, and either an interview or other screening instrument to determine the candidate's appropriateness for certification.

Additionally, 19 TAC RULE §227.10(4) states that "the candidate shall demonstrate basic skills in reading, written communication, and mathematics or by passing the Texas Academic Skills Program® (TASP®) test or the Texas Higher Education Assessment® (THEA®) with a minimum score of 230 in reading, 230 in mathematics, and 220 in writing. In the alternative, a candidate may demonstrate basic skills by meeting the requirements of the Texas Success Initiative (TSI)".

As stated in the findings, all 19 schools required an application for admission. Four of the universities required an application fee ranging from \$10 - \$100, but none specified how the fee was used or what costs it covered, so it is not clear that the fee is used to meet any type of admission criteria. A variety of documentation requirements for the application process included ethics statements, writing samples, complete portfolios, and two programs mentioned interviews. The specific purposes for these requirements were not stated, but the writing samples, portfolios, inter-



views, and ethics statements could be assumed to relate to the TAC requirements for “appropriateness for certification.”

The criteria for the required number of semester credit hours (SCH) also varied. Of the universities listing SCH requirements, all but three required a minimum of 54 hours; nine having a higher requirement of 60+ SCH. This demonstrates the expectations that teacher education applicants must have the majority of the core college courses completed before applying to a teacher education program.

In regard to the data relating to the 12-credit hour in the certification area requirement, only eight universities addressed this on their website. It should be noted this is a relatively new rule and it is possible the websites of the various programs had not been updated to reflect the change.

Based on available data, all but two universities in the study met the state minimum requirements for GPA, where the universities listed a required 2.0 GPA, instead of the state minimum 2.5 GPA. As the 2.0 GPA requirement does not meet state criteria as stated in the 19 TAC 227.10, it was indeterminate whether this was incorrectly reported on the websites due to webmaster oversight or the universities were non-compliant with the state regulations.

The successful completion of variety of coursework including English, Math, and Reading was a requirement for most of the universities in this study. Other coursework cited included Speech Communications, Child or Human Development, Educational Psychology, and History or Political Science. The latter were specifically used for meeting reading skills requirements. Six schools cited a grade of C or better in a Speech Communications course was needed to demonstrate proficiency of oral communication skills.

It was also found that five of the programs required three letters of recommendation for the applicants, with one school specifying the requirement that one letter must be from a faculty member. The specific purposes for these requirements were not stated, but could be assumed to relate to the TAC requirements for “appropriateness for certification.” It may also be possible that requiring a letter of recommendation from a faculty member might offer information beyond what would be included otherwise, such as insights into candidates’ classroom behavior that has implications for professional dispositions.

The state of Texas 19 TAC RULE §227.10(4) states that “the candidate shall demonstrate basic skills in reading, written communication, and mathematics or by passing the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) test or the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) with a minimum score of 230 in reading, 230 in mathematics, and 220 in writing. In the alternative, a candidate may demonstrate basic skills by meeting the requirements of the Texas Success Initiative (TSI).” Eighteen of the schools required state minimum or above scores on the THEA or approved equivalent, and one cited the TSI as the adopted measure. Nine schools required reading scores above 240, three math programs stated math scores above 240, and five schools cited writing scores above 230 on the THEA. Several alternative assessments were listed by several programs and included Compass, Asset, Accuplacer, SAT, and ACT. Required scores listed for these alternative assessments varied.

Most of the information reported on the university websites did not indicate whether the background check would be conducted by the university in question, or if the paperwork required was for public school use in field experiences. Although, one program required a background check as a pre-requisite to admission, and one required a self-disclosure of a criminal history on their application. Many universities have some type of requirement for candidates to give permission for criminal history background checks to be performed by outside entities before participating in any field placements. Many school districts will run the background checks on candidates before allowing them to come into the schools.

Three of the research questions (letters of recommendation, NCATE, and disposition/fitness to teach) address the need for candidates to exhibit behaviors indicative of “best-practice” and which have been shown to lead to student success. As noted in the findings, there is a lack of specific criteria relating to the demonstration of acceptable teacher behaviors or dispositions. As three of the universities cited NCATE accreditation, and two mentioned seeking NCATE accreditation, the following information may provide some guidance in this area.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) requires Teacher preparation programs seeking accreditation to identify criteria and assess candidate dispositions in order to meet standards 1 and 3.

Standard 1: Candidate Knowledge, Skills , and Professional Dispositions Candidates preparing to work in schools as teachers or other school professionals know and demonstrate the content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and skills, pedagogical and professional knowledge and skills, and **professional dispositions** necessary to help all students learn. Assessments indicate that candidates meet professional, state, and institutional standards.

Standard 3: Field Experiences and Clinical Practice The unit and its school partners design, implement, and evaluate field experiences and clinical practice so that teacher candidates and other school professionals develop and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and **professional dispositions** necessary to help all students learn.

NCATE defines

Professional Dispositions as: Professional attitudes, values, and beliefs demonstrated through both verbal and non-verbal behaviors as educators interact with students, families, colleagues, and communities. These positive behaviors support student learning and development. NCATE expects institutions to assess professional dispositions based on observable behaviors in educational settings. The two professional dispositions that NCATE expects institutions to assess are fairness and the belief that all students can learn. Based on their mission and conceptual framework, professional education units can identify, define, and operationalize additional professional dispositions. (Retrieved July 11, 2011. NCATE Glossary: <http://www.ncate.org/Standards/NCATEUnitStandards/NCATEGlossary/tabid/477/Default.aspx>)

Although NCATE offers guidelines to institutions, they do not dictate a set of specific outcomes or assessments. Due to the limited information on the specific indicators used by each university to meet the criteria relating to dispositions and a lack of specific definition and guidelines from the state of Texas, further research in this area is indicated.

Some programs cited requirements that set them apart from others. Two schools required the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, but did not state any specific criteria that must be met. The rationale for the use of this particular assessment instrument for determining admission to a teacher preparation program was not provided by either program. A possible rationale for this requirement may be to meet the reading requirement for admission, but it is not clear how the results of this assessment relate to candidates success in admission, program, or retention in the teaching field.

One program required successful completion of a written essay and may be directly linked to the written communication skills requirement of the TAC. Two universities had oral language proficiency requirements. As this does not link directly to the TAC basic admission criteria, with the possible exception of oral communication skills, questions pertaining to this requirement arose. Is this a part of a bilingual program? Are there certain demographics that impact these two universities, thus the oral language proficiency requirement?

CONCLUSIONS

After analyzing the variety of data collected from the 19 university-based teacher preparation programs, it soon becomes apparent the majority of data is quantitative and focuses on content knowledge. The issue becomes the predictive validity of this type of information in determining quality teaching ability. High GPAs cannot predict responsive teaching strategies. Basic skills in reading, writing, math, and oral communication cannot predict successful facilitation of student learning. Completing 60 hours of coursework before admission to the teacher education program cannot predict whether a candidate is passionate about teaching.

A major issue emerging from the data is the lack of measures to assess attitude towards teaching. Although NCATE accredited programs have met a professional dispositions requirement, this is not a general trend. Evaluating for attitude or disposition is much more complex than looking at statistical data. There is no firm quantitative template, and programs seem to shy away from screening measures requiring professional judgment; however, this could be the most critical area for admission. Given there is little research support for the predictive validity of the quantitative measures in determining quality teaching ability, it seems reasonable to indicate it is necessary to look through another lens.

Based on this limited look at several Texas teacher preparation programs, it appears as though most programs are doing a reasonable job of screening for academics. However, most programs have difficulty screening for actual teacher



behaviors that should make up the majority of a teacher's day due to the lack of specific guidelines from the state. The current screening measures and admission requirements neglect teacher behaviors, such as problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, reasoning skills, and adherence to social ethics. Knowing university-based teacher preparation programs are currently under attack by the public for producing ineffective teachers, it is critical for teacher preparation programs to demonstrate to the public the thoroughness of their screening measures and admission criteria. And further, to demonstrate those measures and criteria can be linked directly to quality teaching. As a profession, are we asking the right questions of our future teachers? This research suggests we may not be.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is imperative teacher preparation programs develop valid and reliable screening measures. Admission criteria should evaluate content knowledge, problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, reasoning skills, adherence to social ethics and professional dispositions toward teaching and learning. The most logical way to improve the predictive validity of teacher preparation program admission criteria to quality teaching is to tailor the admission criteria to the definition of quality teaching. Before this is possible, the field of education must agree on a basic definition of quality teaching and how it can be measured. Teacher preparation programs, however, cannot wait for the field to navigate the quagmire that defining quality teaching has become. It is necessary for individual teacher preparation programs to develop a plan for its individual student population.

Further research on professional dispositions is necessary so teacher preparation programs can develop criteria to measure the specific indicators related to dispositions during the screening process. This should include identification of specific behaviors of candidates who ultimately may not successfully complete a teacher preparation program or be retained in the profession. Additionally, further research on methods of tracking candidate performance throughout the program that depend on both statistical data and self-reflection by the candidate, and the program could enrich the database of knowledge about programs. Finally, further research on program graduates admitted under current criteria could enlighten needed changes.

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APPENDIX A

UNIVERSITIES INCLUDED IN STUDY WITH URL ADDRESSES

- Angelo State University
http://www.angelo.edu/dept/education/advising/educator_prep_prog.html#field
- Midwestern State University
<http://education.mwsu.edu/> (in the Policy Manual)
- Prairie View A&M University
<http://www.pvamu.edu/Include/Curriculum%20and%20Instruction/Forms/Application%20for%20teacher%20education.pdf>
- Sul Ross State University Rio Grande College
<http://rgc.sulross.edu/pages/187.asp>
- Sul Ross State University
<http://www.sulross.edu/pages/3190.asp>
- Tarleton State University
<http://www.tarleton.edu/eps/TEP/requirements/index.html>
- Texas A&M International University
<http://www.tamui.edu/coedu/admission.shtml>
- Texas A&M University Commerce



<http://web.tamu-commerce.edu/academics/colleges/educationHumanServices/educatorCertificationAcademicServices/default.aspx>

- Texas A&M University Corpus Christi
http://education.tamucc.edu/teacher_education/forms.html
- Texas A&M University Kingsville
<http://www.tamuk.edu/cehp/ceps/epp.html> <http://www.tamuk.edu/academics/catalog/2010-2012/edu.pdf>
- Texas A&M University San Antonio
<http://www.tamusa.tamus.edu/undergradcatalog/2009-2010.pdf>
- Texas A&M University Texarkana
<http://www.tamut.edu/teachcert/index.php?pageid=36>
- Texas Southern University
<http://archive.tsu.edu/pages/436.asp>
- University of Houston Clear Lake
http://b3308-adm.uhcl.edu/UHCL_ONLINE_Catalogue/2010-2011UndergradCatalogue/admission-to-the-teacher-education-program.htm
- University of Houston Victoria
<http://www.uhv.edu/edu/52.aspx>
- University of Texas Brownsville
http://www.utb.edu/vpaa/ucatalog/10-11/Documents/Degrees/BAIS_EC-6_ESL_GEN.pdf
- University of Texas Tyler
<http://www.uttyler.edu/education/admission.php>
- University of Texas of the Permian Basin
<http://soe.utpb.edu/media/pdf/initial-certification/Application-to-Teacher-Cert-Program.pdf>
- West Texas A&M University
http://catalog.wtamu.edu/preview_entity.php?catoid=4&ent_oid=65&returnto=278

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONS ADDRESSING CRITERIA FOR ADMISSION TO TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM

1. Is the program National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accredited?
2. Must the student complete an application to be admitted to the program?
3. Must the student pay an application fee?
4. If there is an application fee, how much is it?
5. Is an interview or other screening measure specified?
6. How many hours must the student have completed to be admitted to the program?
7. How many hours must be completed in the major teaching field to be admitted to the program?

8. What is the minimum cumulative GPA requirement for admission to the program?
9. Are letters of recommendation required as part of the application to the program?
10. If letters of recommendation are required, how many are required?
11. If letters are required, is it stipulated who may write the letters?
12. What requirements exist related to the demonstration of basic skills in reading, written communication and mathematics or testing for admission to the program?
13. What minimum requirements for scores are stipulated?
14. Are specific courses required to be completed for application to the program?
15. If specific courses are required, what are those courses?
16. Are there also grade requirements stipulated for those courses?
17. Is a criminal background check required for application to the program?
18. Is a disposition or fitness to teach evaluation of the student required for application to the program?
19. Are there other requirements unique to the program?
20. What criteria are reported for the demonstration of oral communication skills?